Comparative Value Chain Analysis: Councilmatic NYC vs. Chicago

This analysis compares the discontinued Councilmatic NYC platform with the existing Chicago Councilmatic, exploring the critical factors influencing the sustainability of civic tech projects. It examines how funding models, government partnerships, community engagement, and strategic planning impact each stage of the value chain.

I. Introduction:

Councilmatic platforms aim to enhance transparency and civic engagement. This analysis compares NYC's and Chicago's platforms, focusing on value chain activities, their influence on impact, and the interplay of technical, organizational, and governance challenges.

II. Value Chain Comparison:

Activity Category	Activity	NYC (Defunct)	Chicago (Existing)	Impact & Difference System Dynamics

Inbound Logistics	Data Acquisition	NYC Council Legistar API (efficient, but created dependency)	Chicago City Clerk's legislative management systems (eLMS and previously Legistar), scraping (less efficient, but more resilient)	NYC's direct API connection ensures real-time, accurate data, fostering trust. Chicago's scraping method introduces potential inconsistencies and lags. This difference highlights the systemic impact of data source reliability. While NYC had better initial access, its dependency on the Legistar API proved fatal. Chicago's method, though less efficient, fostered greater independence. This highlights the trade-off between data access and platform autonomy.
	Data Cleaning & Standardization	OCD Standard	OCD Standard	Both use OCD, but variations in data structure could impact processing efficiency. Data cleaning challenges are crucial for both, impacting data quality and usability.
Operations	Infrastructure & Hosting	Database solution (e.g., PostgreSQL)	Database solution (e.g., PostgreSQL)	NYC's infrastructure was handed over to the City Council due to lack of funding. NYC's

				reliance on City Council hosting proved unsustainable following personnel changes in the City. Chicago's independent hosting, while potentially more resource-intensive, allows for greater control by the community.
Outbound Logistics	Data Display	User-friendly format, interactive visualizations	User-friendly format	NYC's potential for richer visualizations enhances user understanding and engagement. Both platforms must address the challenge of balancing user-friendly design with complex legislative information.
	Search Functionalities	“Powerful search”	Keyword, sponsor, topic search	NYC's "powerful search" suggests advanced capabilities, potentially impacting user experience. The platform can leverage its search capabilities as a core value proposition.
	Data Distribution	APIs, RSS feeds	APIs, RSS feeds	The discontinuation of NYC's APIs could have impacted third-party developers. Chicago needs to

				maintain API stability and documentation to foster a developer ecosystem.
Marketing & Sales	Promotion & Outreach	Official NYC Council website integration, word of mouth in BetaNYC and its affiliates	Primarily relies on search engine optimization (SEO)	NYC's official status provides increased visibility and credibility. This was helpful for its fundraising however most active users are their community members, city's staff and community board members. Chicago's reliance on SEO for promotion, while cost-effective, might limit its reach. Exploring targeted outreach to specific user groups could increase engagement and build a stronger community.
	Collaboration	Code for America, NYC Council, DataMade	DataMade, other local groups	NYC's transition to city council management highlights the challenge of balancing internal and external collaborations. Chicago's ongoing collaborations highlight the importance of shared values and long-term vision.
	Community	Increased engagement	Receives bug reports from	NYC's official status enhances

	Engagement	of the City's staff due to official status. Engagement within Civic Tech communities. Engagement ceased with platform discontinuation.	community members, but limited direct contribution to development	engagement potential. However, lack of sustained community engagement contributed to its demise. While Chicago benefits from community feedback on bugs, the lack of broader community involvement in development could limit its long-term sustainability. Strategies for simplifying the codebase, improving documentation, and actively engaging the open-source community could foster greater participation and reduce the burden on DataMade.
Support Activities	Firm Infrastructure	Server management, database management (managed by NYC Council – client-funded model)	Server management, database management (DataMade self-supported model)	NYC's infrastructure benefits from city council management. But the dependence on the City Council for infrastructure proved fatal. NYC's client-funded model proved unsustainable when the client (NYC Council) withdrew support.

				Chicago's self-supported model, where DataMade invests in the project without a client, offers greater autonomy and resilience, though it relies on DataMade's continued commitment and resources. Chicago may face challenges in securing long-term funding and resources for infrastructure maintenance.
	Human Resources	NYC Council staff – no longer allocated Outsource to DataMade - Elected official's office no longer wished to paying after personnel changes	DataMade	NYC's reliance on City Council staff made it vulnerable to political changes. Chicago's model where DataMade invests in human resources may face challenges in retaining technical expertise or long-term funding.
	Technology Development	Development by NYC Council & potentially DataMade. (Development halted)	Primarily maintained by DataMade staff, despite being open source	NYC's development is driven by the city council, making it vulnerable to political decisions. While Chicago benefits from being open source, its complexity limits community contributions. This reliance on

			DataMade, while providing stability, creates a potential vulnerability if DataMade's resources shift. Strategies for simplifying the codebase or incentivizing community contributions could enhance long-term sustainability.
	Procurement	Leveraging existing city resources – resources withdrawn	NYC's procurement benefited from city resources, but eventually proved unsustainable due to political changes. Chicago may face challenges in navigating procurement processes and securing necessary resources.

III. Critical Systems Thinking & Contextual Factors within the Value Chain

This section analyzes the critical success factors identified in the previous Value Chain Analysis, focusing on the interplay between government involvement, community ownership, data management, and project sustainability across different value chain activities.

A. Data Acquisition and Government Partnerships (Inbound Logistics)

Councilmatic NYC's reliance on the NYC Council's Legistar API, while initially efficient, created a single point of failure. This highlights the risk of over-dependence on government-controlled data sources. Chicago's more diverse

approach, incorporating scraping alongside other data sources, demonstrates a more resilient strategy, though potentially less efficient. This illustrates the trade-off between efficiency and resilience in data acquisition, emphasizing the need for diversified data sources to mitigate the risks associated with government partnerships.

B. Data Processing, Maintenance, and Community Engagement (Operations & Support Activities)

The contrasting maintenance models of Councilmatic NYC and Chicago highlight the importance of community engagement. NYC's government-managed system lacked the community ownership and sustained engagement necessary for long-term maintenance and adaptation. Chicago's open-source model, while primarily maintained by DataMade, offers a potential pathway for community contribution, although its complexity currently limits this participation. This underscores the need for strategies to simplify the codebase and foster community involvement to ensure ongoing maintenance and responsiveness to evolving user needs. This also highlights the tension between the efficiency of a centrally managed system and the resilience and adaptability of a community-driven approach.

C. Data Display, Search Functionalities, and User Engagement (Outbound Logistics)

The Councilmatic NYC's advanced search functionality, a key value proposition, demonstrates the importance of prioritizing user-centric design. The continuous improvement and responsiveness of Councilmatic Chicago to user feedback are vital for maintaining user trust and ensuring the platform's relevance.

D. Funding Models and Sustainability (All Value Chain Activities)

The contrasting funding models of Councilmatic NYC (client-funded) and Chicago (DataMade self-supported) highlight the critical role of funding in all stages of the value chain. NYC's dependence on a single client proved unsustainable, while Chicago's model, though reliant on DataMade's continued commitment, demonstrates a different approach. This emphasizes the need for diversified funding strategies to mitigate the risks of reliance on single sources of funding, whether government or private. Sustainable funding is essential for maintaining infrastructure, supporting human resources, and ensuring the long-term viability of the project across all value chain activities.

IV. Conclusion:

The contrasting trajectories of Councilmatic NYC and Chicago offer crucial lessons for civic tech sustainability. Long-term success requires not only technical proficiency but also strategic planning for funding, community engagement, and navigating government partnerships. NYC initially benefited from official support and

robust infrastructure but then the dependency to official support became the single point failure. While Chicago's open-source model offers potential advantages, the reality is that its complexity concentrates maintenance primarily within DataMade. This reliance, while currently providing stability, highlights a potential single point of failure. Strategies for simplifying the codebase, improving documentation, and actively engaging the open-source community could distribute the maintenance burden, enhance long-term sustainability, and unlock the full potential of the open-source model. Furthermore, exploring more proactive marketing and outreach strategies beyond SEO could broaden the user base and build a stronger community around the project. By addressing these challenges, civic tech initiatives can maximize their impact and ensure their long-term viability.